

Reflective thinking on communicative teaching in writing

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Abstract: For second language learners, English writing as one of the forms of communication is particularly tough. In order to help learners to write correctly and fluently, teachers could guide learners to integrate genre and content reasonably to meet their communicative needs, to motivate their interest and to improve their writing skills. The paper provides diverse teaching techniques and strategies for teachers to help learners from the elementary level, the intermediate level or the advanced level to be fully exposed in communicative activities in class. And teachers are expected to give feedbacks to ideas, feelings, or perceptions that students have tried to communicate through their writing in a sensible way. Teaching writing is a process of aiding learners to discover themselves and implicit communication with readers with purposes.

Key words: writing; genre; process; composing strategies; feedback

To learners, if vocabulary is the building blocks of language study, then sentences are the layer of the building, and only after the learners finish constructing the whole building successfully, could they achieve the final point of writing, which is commonly regarded as the most difficult language skill in language learning. Byrne (1988, p. 4) provides three reasons to explain why writing is difficult: First, writing itself is a solitary activity without interaction or the feedback but depends solely on the writer himself; Second, during the process of producing, writer himself needs to make the effort to bridge the gap and to realize the possibility in communication; Third, writers have to present themselves to the unknown readers by effective instruction.

However, all these difficulties are particularly tough for the second language (L2) learners. Like Tribble (1996, p. 14) says when someone learns how to write, 'they are getting involved in an activity in which questions of social role, power, and the appropriate use of language cannot be avoided'. To the teacher, the more advanced the language teaching is, the tougher the teaching of writing would be. Many teaching-English-as-a-foreign-language (TEFL) teachers admit that their knowledge of writing practice was limited and this creates a gap between their ideal and their actual teaching situation. (Pennington, 1997, p. 132) What's the dilemma of teachers in teaching writing? How to improve students' writing skill? What do the teachers need to do in their teaching? When talking about these questions, the TEFL teachers should think about the basic elements related with L2 writing: the L2 writer, the reader, the L2 text and the writing context.

1. TEFL teachers' dilemma

No one has doubts about the function of using a language, that is, to communicate. Nevertheless, the ways of exchanging information by languages are limited, in which the main styles are gestures, meaningful pictures, speaking and listening, and what's more, writing is the most meaningful and permanent way to pass the

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knowledge on one generation after another. “Writers and readers obviously do not interact in the sense that they take turns as do speakers and listeners.” (Nystrand, 1986, p. 40) Therefore, a successful communication between writers and readers counts a lot on what and how do the writers provide information for their various kinds of audience. Ur (1996, p. 163) provides the standards of language in writing: careful constructions, precise and varied vocabulary, correct expression in general, and the slow and reflective nature of the process of writing. These ideal standards are not only expected by the writers but by the teachers as well, nevertheless, in the EFL writing classroom there are always some divergences between the ideal expectation and the reality, the writer and the reader, the writer and the written works, etc.

Differences exist between first language (L1) writing classrooms and second language (L2) ones, which are the obvious facts that TEFL teachers should be concerned with in planning and executing. The common goal of both younger and elder students sitting in the EFL classroom is to study the language but many adult learners seem to expect more since they desire to accomplish more practical goals, such as to conduct business in English, which is defined as instrumental motivation by Gradner and Lambert (Leki, 1992, p. 43). Thus, genre and content will be greatly colored by their impetus for study a foreign language and their life experiences drawn from outside the school. Caudery (1996, p. 17) summarizes the points of difference between the L1 teaching situation and the L2 one, i.e. delayed development in writing skill, limited knowledge of the language code, the complication in the composing process in-between two languages, different attitudes to error, diverse needs and goals to improve writing skills and culture-based differences. Therefore, two problems are related in the teaching of written English: One is to form grammatical sentences and the other is to fulfil a given rhetorical aim (Byrne, 1980, p. 172). The written works of the L2 learners might involve much more personal thoughts and attitudes rather than the plain imitating of others mechanically but the proper controlled and guided writing is still the main task in teaching.

In order to help L2 learners write correctly and fluently, teachers should understand the aims and the process of their learning. Geist (1996, p. 51) summarizes three dimensions of learning, which are the acquisition of techniques and skills through observation and imitation, the gathering of experience by experimenting and trial and error and the acquisition of the knowledge of rules, a vocabulary and a systematic understanding via verbal explanation or instruction. Thus, what teachers need to do is to help learners find the real purposes to write, to show them how to do it, to give learners the internal impetus to reflect on their own and to evaluate and correct it at the right time. But the most important thing in teaching writing is to give learners as many chances as possible to have adequate exposure to the language through activities, so that they could sense the language function as a communication system. No matter what our starting point would be, if teachers teach L2 writing, as Tribble (1996, p. 67) suggested, two focuses need to be emphasized: one is on genre, the other is on process.

2. Focuses in teaching writing

What is genre? How could the teachers highlight it? Genre is a term “evolved both within disciplines and across time” (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000, p. 172) and “used in literacy pedagogy” (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 7), “with the different types of text used in our culture to get things done” (Martin & Rothery, 1993, p. 147) Thus, it is easy to find out genre deals with both content and context knowledge, that is the concepts in certain area and the social context reflected in the writing.

In order to motivate learners, teachers should use genre in a meaningful way. Lightbown and Spada (2002, p. 56) suggest two factors affecting motivation in foreign language learning: learners’ communicative needs and their

attitudes towards the second language community. From the aspect of genre in writing, we put different tasks, materials and activities to the different level of students, in the meantime, to consider their interest as the way to improve their motivation by providing imaginative expectations, sometimes even needs to be “staged and purposive” (Christie, 1993, p. 158). For example, at the elementary level, we can get the students to complete a simple short story and share their fanciful imagination, write a greeting card or a little poem to their family or friends; for the intermediate level, students are encouraged to reproduce or restate what they have read in the text and practice more on common daily writing styles, such as letters for different purposes, newspaper report for the later discussion of current heated topic etc.; for the advanced learners, designing a practical project from their own interests and analyzing it by themselves and giving a formal report on that might be more interesting. We use genre-based approach to make students aware of the differences between spoken and written language so that “they are much better placed to become confident writers” (Tribble, 1996, p. 16), to offer explicit and systematic explanation of language functions in the social context (Hyland, 2003, p. 18), to demonstrate how texts are structured in distinctive steps or stages to achieve their purposes (Gee, 1996, p. 38).

Meanwhile, when students try to learn a language, they always try to examine their culture and compare it to that of the target language, which related to the context knowledge, like Leki (1992, p. 62) mentioned “such reflection becomes a great well of resources for writing.” But because of the culture differences, preferences in writing styles and the restricted knowledge of the L2 code, the L1 writing skills could not be transferred directly into L2 writing freely (see Raimes, 1985; Caudery, 1996), such as some traditional sayings or proverbs could not be translated directly into English; or in EFL writing the learners need to compromise in the writing structures. According to the result of comparing carried out by Kaplan (1972, quoted by Clyne, 1987, p. 77), he says writing in English belongs to the Anglo-Saxon “linearity” structure while the Oriental structure tends to be “circular”, with the topic looked at from different tangents, and Romance is free to digress and introduce “extraneous” material etc.. If different countries apply distinct discourse structures, international academic and co-operation may suffer. Therefore, the TEFL teachers could not take overall techniques using in L1 writing classrooms for granted as the ones for L2 writing classrooms.

If teachers want to make students aware of the interrelation between sentences and paragraphs in L2, integrating reading and writing may help them better understand the process of writing while improving linguistic accuracy as well. In Byrne’s (1988, p. 9) words, although reading itself may not produce good writers, it is an essential pre-condition to the good writings. For example, after reading a piece of related article, students could involve into some activities by choosing proper words to fill in the blanks which benefits their appropriate choice of words, answering sequenced questions to guide them to achieve clear logical thinking and composing; rearranging sentences and paragraphs to help students realize the coherence of a whole text; and imitating or rewriting to encourage them to be closer to confident writers. And sometimes students are encouraged to use different ways to demonstrate their global understanding, such as pictures, tables, diagrams, plans or flow-charts etc. These activities focus on different aspects, students can be made to realize and understand functional knowledge of the texts and gradually have the confidence and interest to the written tasks independently

After comparing the similarity between L1 and L2 writing, many research findings support the idea that L2 writing classes needed to focus more on composing rather than on language (Leki, 1992, p. 77). Jones (1982) analyzed the composing strategies of L2 learners and concluded that lack of competence in composing rather than lack of linguistic competence is the source of difficulty in L2 writing (quoted by Krapels, 1990, p. 40). Thus, planning effectively seems to be the premise of better writing. Before teachers guide the students to write, firstly,

the purpose of this piece of writing and the readers that the students write to should at least be pre-written in students' mind. Teachers could help students to draw up an outline of the contents and help them to consider the readers' expectations. Moss (1998, p. 141) points out that promoting writing for real audiences is one of the most important means to attract students' attention to technical and presentational matters, which will make the communication effective. Then, during composing, teachers could help students find out the relationship among the items in a list by adding suggested conjunction words to show the cause-and-effect or parallel relationship, etc. to develop the text, to revise the plan and to review the idea. In the meanwhile, remind students to consider the readers' expectations. "Good writers tend to concentrate on getting the content right first and leave details like correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar until later" (Hedge, 1988, p. 23). The final part is revision and editing done either by students independently and peer editing or by teacher and students together. Although checking accuracy is an important part in the editing, rethinking the entire structure still needs to be highlighted.

In teaching writing, the foremost idea which is often neglected by the teacher is to allow the students write purposefully. And this is also the most mature stage suggested by Rivers (cited by White 1987, p. 261) as expressive writing. Students have the responsibility to choose the topics they like and use pair work writing as a foundation to exchange the ideas with partners. However, in teaching writing, especially for the beginners, we still teach them step by step in accordance with accuracy, fluency and then with purpose. The following activities are designed for improving accuracy:

- (1) Give students some different selected words;
- (2) Making some sentences by using these words;
- (3) Give students some jumbled sentences;
- (4) Rearrange those sentences in a logical order;
- (5) Give students some linking words, such as conjunction, coordinators or sequences, to organize an interlinked text;
- (6) Students rewrite sentences with a change of subject, descriptive modifiers or the singular/plural forms
- (7) Imitate this paragraph to write personal experiences;
- (8) Exchange the works with the partner and make any necessary changes or corrections.

For the intermediate learners, writing with fluency is one of the goals needed to be achieved. Therefore, learners not only need help with linguistic form, such as grammar, sentence structure etc. but need the help with the organization of texts as well (Hedge, 1988, p. 24). Only after having adequate preparation on collecting ideas and outlining the topics, could they express themselves in a closely structured way. Thus, teachers need to teach students what is the purpose of thinking, what need to be thought, how to think, which aspects of the thinking process need to be finished in the pre-writing section. And here are some suggestions:

- (1) Brainstorming in groups and individually;
- (2) Gathering the information and making a list of things that need to be included;
- (3) Making a diagram, a chart or even a picture to illustrate the relationship of the each content included;
- (4) Large and small group discussion again to clarify the layout of the written works;
- (5) Using free writing and imagining writing, which are "specific processes for free probing of thoughts" (Zemelman, et al., 1993, p. 51);
- (6) Through imaginary dialogues and role-play to reinforce the importance of the readers and highlight the purpose of this writing to motivate the learners.

By those thinking activities, learners may discover various styles and strategies to clarify their ideas in the

writing, while considering the expectations from the readers as well as the writers him/herself. Thus, the writer could choose the most appropriate idea that he/she wants to express and write the composition without too many blocks.

Hedge (1988, p. 99) lists general types of writing, which are static description, process description, narrative, cause and effect, discussion, comparison, classification and definition. In order to make these types of writing practical, learners need to be taught how to write an article with purpose. But whatever, students need to take ownership and responsibility to make choices on their own topics (Zemelman, et al. 1993, p. 50). Through the following directions, teachers could help students to achieve their own purposes:

(1) For the description writing, teachers could use a picture of a section of video to help students catch the main feature or the logical development in description;

(2) For the discussion, comparison and cause-and-effect writing, teachers could use interviewing, questionnaires or conduct a survey to give students concrete ideas to have something to write;

(3) For the narrative or the definition writing, teachers could use some related materials to do some observing and note-taking practice to retell or reproduce the content and discover the sequencing underlying it.

Besides those activities mentioned above to improve learners learning interest and writing skills, more and more educators suggest some hi-tech activities to achieve effective learning and teaching in writing. Since students have a welcoming attitude toward the computer, Davidson (1996, p. 92) suggest using word-processing as a tool to help students prewriting, editing and revising in a more relaxed atmosphere with better working conditions. Stewart and Stidham (1996, p. 136) recommend bulletin board system (BBS) as an access to receive comments and advice as the students work, and shaping their writing from the development of ideas through to the final draft. Some other one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many forms of interactions could be realized by emails, chat rooms, or video conferencing etc., which make the value of thinking as a process of constructing meaning (Derewianka, 2003, p. 200). And in the later part we could use those electronic materials to publish students' works, which could motivate their interests and find self-confidence in writing.

3. Feedback in writing

L2 learners care about both form and content. It is natural for the L2 learner to be captious about their errors when they produce their L2 knowledge, since this is the primary and basic step for them during the learning. Therefore, after completing a composition each time, they are expecting the teacher to point out the grammatical mistakes they made. Meanwhile, they try their best to produce their thoughts and hope the audience, mainly the teacher, appreciates their works. An experiment carried out by Raimes (1985, p. 246) proves that when writing takes place in L2, the students are concerned more to get down their ideas on paper rather than concerned with accuracy as much as we thought. Moreover, most EFL teachers link a view of English as a subject of teaching rather than a good way to teach students to communicate effectively. Thus, the teachers are constantly "forced away from the content of the text toward the way the content is presented" (Ilona, 1990, p. 59). Their high expectation on accuracy is demonstrated by correcting every grammatical error in the compositions. Many researchers point out that it is still an open question whether students who got error correction would write more accurately in the future assignments (Chandler, 2003, p. 269, Fathman & Whalley, 1990, p. 180). Macken and Slade (1993, p. 205) claim that effective language assessment is an important strategy for promoting language learning in school. However, sometimes over-correcting can have a very demotivating effect and the teachers need

to keep a proper balance between being accurate and truthful on the one hand and treating students sensitively and sympathetically on the other (Harmer, 1998, p. 84). Therefore, how to assess students' works could be a crucial part in promoting L2 writing skill.

Part of the teachers responsibility to students is to respond to the ideas, feelings, or perceptions that they have tried to communicate through their writing (Tribble, 1996, p. 119). Thus, teachers could use different ways to assess different aspects of written works, including assessing language, structure, the writer's expectation and the readers' response. It is unnecessary for the teacher to focus on specific composition but rather to give a general evaluation to the whole class. Then the member in the peer editing groups could self-evaluate or win the help or suggestions from other members while the teacher could be the assistant to work with them since it is generally assumed that teacher and peer comments are directed at helping students meet certain goals in writing (Hillocks, Jr. 1986, p. 220). After discussion in the editing groups, the teacher could comment on the strengths and weakness generally and let students propose some good examples from their works in different points, such as vocabulary usage, logical organization, task fulfillment, readers' response, communicative functions etc. Helping students write more effectively and finding the confidence to be a good writer are the key ideas in teaching writing.

4. Conclusion

In this paper the importance and difficulties of learning and teaching second language writing have been demonstrated. Writing is a process of discovering oneself and implicit communication with the reader with purposes, which needs not only the language accuracy but the fluency of communicating as well. Some activities have been suggested for the benefit of both students and teachers in the process of learning and teaching writing concerning the genre and the process of writing. Furthermore, appropriate and positive feedback is also the necessity during the learning and teaching. Modes of feedback include the comments from teachers, comments from peers and the combination of the teacher and peers feedback. They are directed at helping students meet goals in writing and give them a clear guideline in their post-writing processing. Teachers should help students find the real purposes to write and help students gather, organize and proper editing their works. What students need is real audiences, and a classroom context of shared learning (Zemelman, et al. 1993. p. 53). Therefore, writing is a kind of interaction either between the writer and the audiences who might be unknown by the writer, or among the teachers, peers and the writer, especially for the teaching. Teaching writing is not as simple as asking students to write whatever they wish to write for varied audiences. Teachers ought to make systematic use of teaching methodologies to promote the competence in writing as well as to develop new technical procedures for the teaching of writing. Language teachers should understand that the point of developing good writing is to develop students' interest and pleasure in writing, to find confidence to be writers, and to dig out the pleasure of producing various effects by using the language.

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